

References

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Elusive Congo Peacock found by film-maker Alan Root

John H. Fanshawe

In a recent letter, Alan Root, well known for his spectacular films of East African wildlife, vividly describes his search for the Congo Peacock *Afropavo congoensis*, one of many elusive animals he has been seeking to capture on film for a series on the ecology of Congo Basin forests.

He writes, "Giles Thornton [Alan Root's assistant] took a motorbike two days down a track that, 30 years ago, was the road to Opienge, 120 miles south-west of Epulu. There he cleared an old mission airstrip and I then flew in the 180 [Cessna light plane] with supplies and another *piki* [motorcycle]. We rode the bikes for another long day on forest trails to the Loya river on the park boundary, and then walked for two days into the park, where we set up a base camp. The hunters we took with us assured us we would hear peacocks when they went to roost, but, though we spent many evenings sitting on ridge tops we did not...perhaps because it was raining most days? We did find lots of signs, scratch marks where they had been feeding, tracks...(they could have been guineafowl), but then we found dust baths containing male and female peacock feathers. It was wonderful forest, full of all sorts of fruiting trees, and signs everywhere of Elephant, Chimps, Gorillas and Okapi."

"On about the tenth day [4 September 1993], I walked off on my own for about a kilometre, found a place where the forest floor was clear, and I had a good, long view, and sat on a stump to watch. After a couple of hours, I heard something rustling the leaf-litter about thirty yards away. It turned out to be a squirrel, and I watched it jump up from the forest floor onto a fallen log...that should have been the end of the leaf noise, but it was still going on...I raised my head from the binoculars to get a wide view, and the movement spooked a male peacock, who had been hidden by a fallen tree except for his head. He broke, but I had my bins right there already and I followed that wonderful head and crest as he ran, and he came out from behind the tree

and I got a great look at him as he scuttled off, low and leaning forward like a cock pheasant."

"I raced back to the hunters, yelling with excitement, and gave a great demonstration of what happens to a European who's been too long in the tropics. They all thought I'd been attacked and grabbed their spears to come to my aid!"

"The peacock does not appear to be rare in the area we operated in. I was wearing a feather in my hat that Don [Turner] got from the New York Zoo and gave me for luck; it was instantly recognised by the people there, and we know that two birds were trapped and eaten within a 50km radius in the three months we were there."

"I also have film of both Plumed and Black Guinea-fowl coming to eat termites spilling from an arboreal nest torn open by a Long-tailed Pangolin - this is going to be a flick for aficionados!! Other interesting dickies seen nesting have been White-crested Hornbill *Tockus albocristatus*, Red-billed Dwarf Hornbill *T. camurus*, and Black Wattled Hornbill *Ceratogymna atrata*, Grey-throated Rail *Canirallus oculus* and Spot-breasted Ibis *Bostrychia rara*."

Alan has also succeeded in finding some rarely seen mammals including; "...the Fishing Genet, known only from about a dozen skins...and I have some great film of them fishing, and Water Chevrotain, the mixed up pig-antelope, that we have discovered does not just swim and dive, but walks about on the bottom of rivers like a hippo...I have film of one walking, eyes open, through a school of fish. We also got film of *Potomogale*, the giant otter-shrew."

It's a great story and, in a subsequent letter, Alan reports that the rainforest film should be set for showing on Independent Television sometime in 1995. The editors will endeavour to publish advance warning of the details. ☺

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